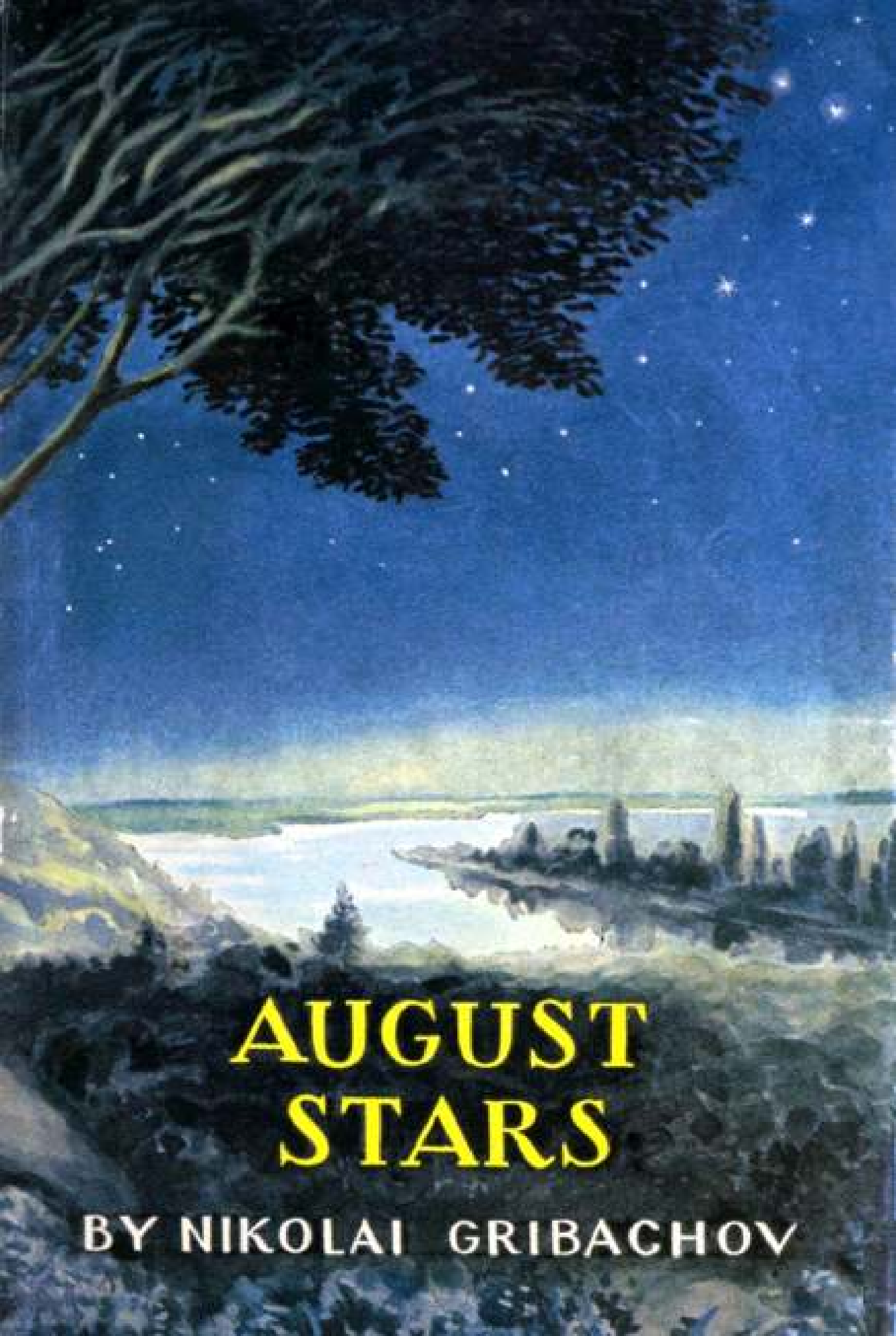
AUGUST
STARS
BY NIKOLAI GRIBACHOV

"August stars . . . they're so sad . . . . They're so bright and yet . . . . Perhaps they feel that winter is coming."

The earth sighs sadly as it takes leave of the summer. The meadows beyond the river are wrapped in a light mist. A melancholy song rolls over hill and dale. And the bright August stars shine steadily in the coldclear sky.

Two people sit on the steep bank of the river. Hushed by the sadness of the night, they find it hard to talk even though they have much to say to each other. Four years he hoped and waited for this meeting.

Marina's heart, once seared with bitter grief, is filled with anxiety. Now it seems as if she is not going to be lonely any longer. What about her boy?

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AUGUST STARS

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AUGUST STARS

ON THE RIVER bank near the floating bridge, now opened to let through some rafts, lies its watchman and operator, Yegor Yegorovich Yastrebov, a man of about thirty-five. On one foot he wears a boot, yellow from frequent contact with water, his other leg ends in a home-made wooden peg with a piece of rubber nailed underneath. His swarthy face, wind-beaten and pock-marked, is concentrated and somewhat grim.

The river is blue, the August sun is still hot. Several roofs and a cluster of poplars can be seen over the ridge of a high and steep chalk bank down which the white ribbon of a road zigzags its way. A lonely cloud, roasted pink on one side, hangs irresolutely over them as if trying to make up its mind which way to go next.

Down below, to the right, a couple of boys in shorts are fishing in shallow waters along the

pebble-strewn low bank, and a little farther off a young woman, the white skin of her plump calves showing from under a tucked-up skirt, is rinsing her washing. Yastrebov, his chin cupped in his hands, his straw hat pushed back from his forehead, gazes fixedly at the woman with his blue eyes, now dark with emotion. He yearns to go and talk to her, but he is put off by the presence of the boys. Besides his attention is distracted by the rafters who dash over the logs with poles in an effort to make a clean passage through the opening of the bridge.

"Left, to the left, you blockhead!" Yastrebov shouts angrily. "You'll break the ropes, damn you."

"It's all ri-i-ght! We wo-on't!"

Another raft goes down the river, leaving a thin trail of smoke from a fire, over which hangs a soot-blackened kettle. The next one has not yet rounded the bend. Yastrebov ponders for a while, then calls to the boys. They come up, flaxen-haired, with peeling noses and backs.

"Well," Yastrebov asks with a disparaging look at the half a dozen tiny grey fishes strung on a willow twig.

"They won't bite, Uncle Yegor," the elder boy speaks up, scratching his leg with the end

of his rod. "The worms are fine—we dug for them in old manure—the fish have lost their appetite."

"Lost their appetite!" Yastrebov repeats mockingly. "You'll be looking for an appetite in the dust in the middle of the road next. How many times have I told you—you've got to learn to choose the right spot. Want to land a bream?"

"Much chance we've got!"

"Yes, you have. See those bushes over there? That's where to go. I tried there myself this morning—got three."

"Let's see them, Uncle Yegor," the boys ask.

"I had them for breakfast right away. Well, go now. You'll thank me for the tip yet. Off you go!"

The boys go away and soon you can only see the tops of their rods behind the bushes, a way off. Yastrebov looks up and down the deserted river and limps nimbly down to the woman, who is still rinsing her washing, up to her knees in water.

"Hello, Marina," he says, taking off his cap and feeling a strange dryness in his mouth. He would like to say something funny, to crack a gay joke, but the words stick to his tongue and he cannot get them out. "Have a little rest."

"Hello, Yegor Yegorovich," the woman says, raising her head and at the same time instinctively straightening her skirt. "Got no time. The brigade-leader said I must go out to work after lunch."

She must be about twenty-six or seven. Her face, flushed with sun and embarrassment, is handsome and austere, her hazel eyes rimmed with thick dark eyelashes have a kindly and slightly bewildered expression, as if they ask —is all this really necessary?

Those who have lived long in a Russian village know girls of this type; they don't catch the eye, never set the tone at the village gatherings of young people, never drive out of their minds dashing accordion players. They bloom quietly and, as it were, somewhat apart from the others, get married unexpectedly and never quarrel with their husbands and relations. If a misfortune befalls them, they bear it in unquailing silence. They usually pass almost unnoticed among girls who are prettier and have a quicker tongue, girls who are like an overflowing river, fast and noisy and dangerous—one mistake and you're carried away in the whirling waters, and never know where you'll end up.

"I want to talk to you, Marina."

"What about, Yegor Yegorovich?"

"Well, I can't say it just like that.... It's four years since Vasily died, and I've been waiting all this time...."

"Don't, please," the woman says, lowering her eyes. Her voice is calm, but a blue vein is pulsating quickly on her neck, just below the ear. "This is no time for it."

"I know it isn't," Yastrebov hastens to explain. "But what can I do? I can't come and see you at home—our busybodies will start wagging their tongues at once—Semenikha for one will be telling stories as tall as the sky.... And our dancing time is over—yours and mine. So, what can we do?"

"I don't know. I just live."

"We all live. I live too—like our doctor's widowed stork—trying to make myself comfortable on my lonely perch all night long. Turning and tossing and going to sleep, head under wing.... Every night I dream of you. I'm happy a whole week after I've seen you here even if it's for ever such a short while. I close my eyes, and I see you as you are.... Oh, there's another of those damned rafts. I must go and see it through.... Well, Marina?"

"I don't know, Yegor Yegorovich, I really don't."

"Come to the bridge tonight," Yastrebov hurries on dropping, for some reason, into a whisper. "Come as soon as they've got their cows in."

"A lot of trucks go past here," Marina says apprehensively. "The lights are as bright as anything. . . . It'll be awkward."

"There are no trucks now," Yastrebov reassures her in a whisper. "The dam was broken in the thunder-storm two days ago. There's no way through until it's been repaired. Well, Marina?"

"All right," the woman says blushing. "Maybe I shall."

Another raft is approaching. Tapping with his wooden leg Yastrebov climbs up to the bridge and assumes command.

"Push off, lads, push off! That's the style!"

Nobody listens to him; the rafters, who have long learnt all there is to know about the whims of the current, work with assurance and harmony, but the watchman can no longer remain quiet.

"Many more coming?" he asks the rafters.

"No more now—you can lock up and turn in."

"You do too, lads."

"No sleep for us!" comes a sullen reply from

a middle-aged man in canvas trousers and a blue singlet. "Not with your mouse-traps—every mile either a bridge or a ferry. . . . Made a regular rubbish-heap out of the river!"

"Come, come," Yastrebov laughs. "Keep your hair on. Take a dip in the river and you'll forget all about it."

After that he closes the bridge throwing his weight on the windlass and puts back in their places various wedges and locks—an intricate home-made system which keeps together the clumsy structure. Then he takes an axe and starts cutting willow and, although there is no need for it whatever, strengthens his cabin as if in expectation of a storm. Meanwhile the sun sinks lower and lower, passes over the tops of the poplars setting them aglow and disappears behind the ridge. Cows moo in the village, the cloud of pinky dust raised by the herd floats down from the steep bank, and the smell of fields and manure hangs over the river.

For another hour various noises reach him from the near-by village street. He hears a little boy crying and women wrangling, and these sounds don't fit into the serene picture of the evening. And then, with amazing rapidity, the twilight thickens as if grey fluff has fallen from the skies, and suddenly a melody

played on an accordion bursts out and swells, filling the whole vast expanse between the earth and the sky. One feels as if this is the earth itself taking leave of the summer with sighs and lamentations.... At that moment Yastrebov notices on the path a figure clad in dark.

"Is that you, Marina?" he asks hesitatingly.

"Yes."

"Thank you. I was looking for you on the road and as you didn't come I wondered if you'd made up your mind to slight me."

"There are too many people there—they'd be asking questions."

Yastrebov fetches a piece of cloth from his cabin and spreads it on a grass-grown hillock. As he sits down beside the woman he feels the heat of her shoulder, and for a while they both look silently on the river. The water gurgles softly as if trying to tell some story of its own; a bitter-sweet tickling smell of wormwood floats in the air. There are no more falling-stars like in July, the sunsets are no longer boisterously crimson, and bright lights glow evenly in the low, coldly transparent sky.

"August stars," the woman sighs softly. "They're so sad."

"Why?" Yastrebov wonders.

"I don't know. They're so bright, and yet.... Perhaps they feel that winter is coming."

"Marina!"

"Yes?"

"I've been waiting four years. Do you think this is the first time I've looked on the road? I do every night. I'd recognize you when you were still up on the crest. But there's one thing that tortures me—it's my leg. They buried it on the Vistula River near the Polish town of Sandomierz. I'm here, but it is over there. I was getting used to it all when your Vasily died four years ago and then I began to hope again and lost my peace. Life has mauled me badly, like the flood mauled that there willow. But the willow doesn't feel it—it just grows on. It's harder on a man."

"Yegor Yegorovich, don't talk about that, please."

"I want you to understand."

"I understand."

Two tears, invisible in the darkness, roll down the woman's cheeks. She dare not wipe them for fear of hurting Yastrebov with her woman's pity. Her hands are coarse and horny, but her heart, seared by all she has suffered, has a generous warmth that she is too shy to show. She will help a neighbour in need, say

a kind word to a crying child, but she will do it quietly, expecting no gratitude and desiring none. The words of praise make her feel embarrassed; at the word of reproach she just lowers her eyes.

For Yastrebov she has a long-standing and complicated feeling. When he came back from the front having lost a leg, she, an unmarried girl then, felt maternal pity for him and might have married him if he had asked her. But the loss of his leg made Yastrebov shy in spite of his strong will; he lost his confidence and shut himself up in his shell. All the time he seemed to be pondering what sort of a life he was going to live, but he could not find any solution. Later she married another ex-soldier who had been shell-shocked in the Bryansk woods. He caught a cold during a spring flood and died of pneumonia. About a year and a half after that she began to feel a surge of quiet tenderness for Yastrebov. On the rare occasions when they met at the bridge she longed to press his dishevelled fair-haired head to her bosom, but he was reticent, and so she turned away when his eyes met hers.

"Marina!"

"Yes?"

"Say something."

"What can I say?"

"I keep dreaming of you, Marina. Honest, I see you in my sleep like I see you now. The other day I dreamed we were sitting under a haystack in the meadow and you were pressing me to eat some soup. But I had no taste for it, I could only see your eyes, and eyebrows, and legs—like I saw them this afternoon on the river. I can't live without you, Marina."

She lowers her head, and her hot shoulder presses closer to his. He notices the movement and cautiously, for fear she might object, puts his arm round her. She recalls the sleepless nights, when the accordion plays merrily out in the street and the girls sing and laugh, when cherry blossom falls down and nightingales jug away till dawn, while she lies restless on her widow's bed, tormented by hot thoughts and loneliness. She recalls snow-storms, when grey masses of snow whirl and rage in the darkness outside, when the wind whistles and howls in the chimney and she sobs with fear and anguish, pitying herself, with no man to cheer and warm her, and the thousands and thousands of other widows robbed by the war of something that no peace can restore to them—love and tenderness.

Sometimes she felt like crying out: "People, do something to repair this wrong," but would immediately realize with despair that nothing could be done—the dead do not rise from their graves. Then she would bite the corner of her pillow so that she could feel the bitter taste of feathers and would weep and weep. Now she feels all her suppressed desires, all her yearning for the hot embrace of man's arms swell within her, and she fancies that the beat of her heart, like the cry of a quail, can be heard as far as the village street.

"Yegor Yegorovich!"

"Yes, Marina?"

"I can't, Yegor Yegorovich."

"You can't what?"

"I shall not marry you."

Heavy silence descends on them. The smell of the wormwood is pungent in the calm of the night, and the water gurgles insistently, "Listen, people, I know something."

"H'm," Yastrebov mumbles, a lump rising in his throat. "I see. I understand, Marina. You're a beautiful woman, you can have your pick. What chance have I?"

He withdraws his arm and makes to rise, but she holds him down gently by the neck.

"I don't mean that."

"No?" he asked, surprised. "What then?"

"I'm thinking of my boy. He's going on for six already."

"Well, what does that matter?"

"Yegor Yegorovich, I know. . . . I've thought about it. He wouldn't mind, he'll get used to you, but what about you? Every time you see the boy you'll think of the other. It may be all right now, when we are alone, it may not matter once or twice, but then it'll be every day, from morning till night. You'll get to hate the boy, and you'll torture me with reminders—and what am I to blame for? You know I loved my husband, but it's two years since I began to care for you. But I don't want to make my boy suffer because of me. His father had to work like a mule when he was a boy; his son mustn't go through the same thing. The collective farm is getting back on its feet, people's hearts are growing warmer, but what's the good of it all if my feelings bring nothing but sorrow to my boy? Is it right, now, to dream of a new happy life and to make a child wretched? I know there are men who want a life of paradise for themselves but who tear up and trample and dig everything around them like a pig in a kitchen-garden. I know you are not like that, but still I'm afraid."

"Yes, you're right." Yastrebov sighs. "I understand, Marina, I really do. Life has made a mess of things, sure enough. Only I shall never say a harsh word to you and never wrong your boy. I'd rather saw my one leg off than do that. You must believe me. As for those who have nothing but kicks for an orphan, they should be whipped in front of everybody; the people would be all for it."

Pressing close to Yastrebov's shoulder the woman starts crying, but her tears are tears of happiness and relief. He understands and sits motionless for a while to let her have her cry. Gradually an idea takes hold of him and he hastens to put it into words.

"You know what, Marina.... I suppose you leave the boy to himself all day long. Our kids are a terrible lot, he might get a beating or what not. You bring him here. I'll make him a fishing-rod—let him learn. We'll prepare our own food...."

"People will talk."

"Never mind the people—they're not so bad. Our people have been through a great deal, they'll understand. Nobody in the world has gone through so much, and yet they're all right. Will you bring him?"

"Yes."

The night grows quieter and denser. The accordion has long ceased playing. White patches and stripes of fog show up in the meadows beyond the river, and above them the August stars send their strong and even glow. Over are the raging thunder-storms with their lightning and hail that flattens everything in the field; no longer do the falling-stars flicker in the pallid, hazy July sky, and everywhere—on the earth and in the sky—peace and tranquillity have set in for a while.

"Look at us—out till dawn, like a pair of sweethearts," the woman laughs. "Well, I must be going. Tomorrow I work on a truck—we'll be unloading the combine. What if I doze off and get buried under the corn? That'll be the end of your wedding."

"Won't you drop in at lunch?"

"No. Well, I'll go."

For a moment the two shadows merge in one in the dusk of the night, then the woman walks briskly up the path. She pauses to catch her breath on the top, silhouetted against the first morning pallor of the sky.

"Marina!" Yastrebov calls to her softly.

"Yes?"

"You'll send the boy then, won't you?"

"All right."

Yastrebov remains alone. He's not in the least sleepy, so he goes on to the bridge and stands there, listening to the gurgling of the water between the logs and waiting for the rafts. The stream glitters dimly, but like a live thing, under the stars, and he hears the creaking of a gate up in the village street.

FIRST LOVE

THE RIVER was afire with moonshine. Not only in its middle but right along the bank overgrown with bushes, fish splashed and sent silver crescents of wavelets scurrying across the surface to die slowly in the distance. The gullies near by were radiant with shaky white haze, the willows at a brook were agleam with moisture, fiery drops of dew shone on the tops of sedge as though a lot of huntsmen had stopped there for a smoke. The moon peeping in through the entrance of the tent where we were spending the night coloured the tobacco smoke a bluish yellow.

"It's an enchanted kingdom," Sergei said with a dreamy sigh. "How can you go to sleep amid all this? I say, is anybody going to tell a fairy-tale?"

"Why anybody?" said Petro. "Let the captain tell one."

"The one about the Sleeping Beauty and her being woken up by a kiss," Sashka added. "Show us how you can tell a story."

"Never met the Princess," the captain said with a short laugh. "Saw the ex-Queen of Rumania, Mother Elena. Will she do?"

"No, the won't," Sashka said, turning down the royal candidate. "Much too old and spiteful. We'll let her live the rest of her days in the American kingdom. You were young once, weren't you, Captain? Try and remember something for your pals."

The captain sighed but did not say a word. Then he sighed again and fell to musing as if feeling about for the right thing in the badly appointed cellars of his memory where things were stored away pell-mell—great and important ones with others, small and insignificant, that he was not sure would ever be of any use.

"Speaking of beauty," he began as if he had stumbled at last upon something of importance. "What *is* beauty? Some gauge it by classical proportions: this kind of nose, that kind of forehead. You believe it's all correct and good but it doesn't appeal to you. Others paint it in a more palpable way: tresses of gold, eyes like sea. But what is gold? For one thing, it is cold —it would do nice for a spoon-bait to catch

sander and perch with!" the captain added, letting his thoughts drift to fishing. "It would shine in the water and wouldn't need rubbing with sand. No, beauty is in the heart and the character. And when all those things of gold and sea go hand in hand with character, then, old or young, you can't help losing your heart to it.

"That was the very type of beauty that appeared in our village.

"It was in 1926, when a fellow called Pyotr Ivanovich Khmelkov came from a near-by village to settle in ours. He bought a house with a small kitchen-garden attached to it, but his heart was not in the land and he seemed not to care for it at all. Instead he made all kinds of saddlery for sale. He even moved to our village to be nearer to the market-town. He didn't impress the villagers: quiet, red-headed, slight of figure, neither a peasant nor a townsman. People like him were neither slighted nor liked in our village. No joy when they came, no sorrow when they went. He was a widower. A distant cousin kept house for him, a timorous woman who used to crack and eat her sunflower seeds sitting on the bench in front of the house, alone even on holidays. They would have remained thus, alone and unnoticed, but

for the saddler's daughter, Sonya. She came into our village parties and dances like a spark into a field of stubble, starting a fire wherever it goes.

"Not that she immediately caught the eye: every third house could boast of a pretty girl and the village was a large one too, about two miles long. I vividly remember that Sunday evening when she first joined the girls sitting in a cluster on the logs. Her grey eyes looked diffidently at the village street in front as though seeing it for the first time. Her fair hair tinged with ash had a dusky quality. Her lips were full and gentle; she sat there tapping a log with her foot in time to a far-off tune which only she could hear. Our two beaus came to her: handsome Nikita Somov, the singer, and Senka Streltsov, a stumpy snub-nosed fellow, ever ready with his fists. He had a chest like a barrel and a face that was always grinning. They stopped in front of Sonya, looked her over as they would an article in a shop-window and exchanged impressions:

" 'All right, eh?'

" 'Not bad.'

" 'For a chap who's lonely?'

" 'Yes—on a weekday, of course.'

"Sonya swallowed hard but said nothing. Senka and Nikita waited, screwing up their

eyes at her; then they went off. That very evening all the lads—there were more than two score of us, from the very young up to the marriageable—knew that Sonya Khmelkova was nothing much. Since that evening it was always the same thing. She would sit among the girls for a while, shyly join in a song and then slip off home. Whether she missed somebody or was just seeing the lay of the land, I don't know.

"On Trinity Sunday or Whit Monday—at that time there was not even a Y.C.L. group in our village and church feast-days were still celebrated as of old with garlands all along the village street—there was a village dance in the street. The girls gave the start; then everybody joined in. After some singing and swirling, the accordionist, warmed to his task by the spirit of festive abandon, set the pace for a vigorous Russian dance. And either because Sonya's girl-friends pushed her forward for fun or a lad dragged her out by hand—there she was, right in the centre of the ring. She stood still for a moment, looking round, her grey eyes puzzled and a little mistrusting, then started backing as if about to plunge back into the crowd, then drew herself up and took a little imperceptible step, then another, so that

the very ground under her feet seemed to have started moving around. Who doesn't know what a Russian dance is, with all its stamping and flinging of legs? But she danced in her own peculiar way; now she bowed and swayed like a birch-tree caught in a gale of wind, now she swirled bending low and straightening up, the hem of her white dress blooming like a daisy round her sunburnt legs, the ends of her kerchief forming a blue crown over her fair head. Her full gentle lips parted in a white-toothed smile. Suddenly a pink handkerchief escaped her hand, fluttered in the air and fell into the dust. Nikita Somov pushed aside Senka, who stood in open-mouthed wonder at Sonya's performance, and rushed to pick it up. But Sonya was nowhere to be seen, she had run home.

"Later we found out that those sudden changes were not uncommon with her. At the time we could not make her out and even went to her house. But her aunt would not speak to us. She just took the bag of sunflower seeds and went inside.

"In the evening Sonya was again among the girls sitting on the logs. A different Nikita came up to her, with a little placatory smile and a good-natured expression to his face. We knew that smile and that approach. We could already

see him, an arm round Sonya's shoulders, seeing her home or standing close to her near a fence, whispering something in her ear. He was a great hand at that sort of thing. Nikita handed her the handkerchief, asked the girls to make room and sat down beside Sonya.

" 'Like me to come with you?' asked Nikita.

" 'Where to?' Sonya screwed her eye at him.

" 'Home.'

" 'I know my way.'

" 'Where, then?'

" 'Home.'

" 'I don't get you,' mumbled Nikita.

" 'That's just it. Try and get me next time,' Sonya said curtly in a voice deliberately raised for all to hear. 'Come and see me when you do.'

"Nikita sprang down from the logs and stood there, his arms akimbo.

" 'Well, I can wait,' he said haughtily. 'But mind you shout loud enough when you want me—I'm rather hard of hearing.'

" 'You'll hear me all right,' promised Sonya. 'You'll hear me and come running if I so much as whisper.'

"Nikita gave a wry smile and went aside to the lads.

" 'If I see anybody with Khmelkova he'll only have himself to blame,' he warned them.

'The cheek of her! She wants putting in her place. I'll teach her, though. Well, I've told you and you know me.'

"We knew Nikita all right. Anybody who crossed him had better keep away from the evening merriment. Everybody would make fun of him, ditties would be sung about him to the accompaniment of the accordion, his hair would be pulled from behind when he was sitting on the logs or dancing in the ring; when he started to dance he was certain to trip over nobody in particular's foot; if he saw a girl home he was sure to stumble over a cord stretched across his path. Nikita never beat up anybody, nor had them beaten up. That wasn't his style. He took pride in ingenious revenge through mockery and humiliation.

"There was only one lad who could face up to Nikita, a thing that even his friend and lieutenant Senka Streltsov would not dare, and that was Alyosha Kruglov. Not that there was anything remarkable about him, not at first glance anyway. He wasn't particularly strong or tall, just about looked his sixteen years. A fair lock topped his high forehead and his nose was lightly sprinkled with freckles. Only his grey eyes struck you differently; their glance was straight and they always seemed

to question. Neither danger nor threat could make them look down.

"Yet it would be absurd to imagine that a pair of anybody's eyes could daunt Nikita. Not him. It was just that in his own way he was fond of this inconspicuous lad and was even afraid of him though he could not have explained why. Alyosha read a lot and knew more than all the other village lads put together. Before he was thirteen he said there was no God and refused to go to church any more. He got a severe thrashing from his father but stuck to his guns. The last year and a half, in autumn slush or in winter frosts when snow was piled high and logs cracked in the walls, he had been seen struggling over the three miles from our village to the one where they had the first Y.C.L. group in the locality. He wasn't a member though, and didn't even have any friends among them. More often than not he just hung around the door of the meeting room listening to what others said. At the age of fourteen, at the time the last grass was being mowed and nights were spent in the field in watching hoppled horses, he was put to a severe test. 'So there's no God?' he was questioned. 'No.' 'And no devils?' 'No.' 'And no ghosts in woods and rivers? Cross the river then.' The

August night was pitch-dark. Sheat-fish plashed in the pools like somebody striking the water with the flat of his hand. On the high chalky bank on the other side of the river a silver poplar broke the silence with the rustle of its leaves. Like a lone sentinel, it rustled in the calmest weather; village tradition had it that witches rested on its branches. One had to wade in right opposite a pool where three months before a friend of Alyosha's, a boy of his age, had drowned when swimming. Challenged in that way, Alyosha went pale and asked two friends of his to go with him; they agreed, but at the water's edge they turned back. And the slender lad swam alone across the inky water, with the sheat-fish milling about and dull stars bursting like bubbles at each of his strokes. The chalky bank reached, he was to give a call, a sign that he had made it. The call came hollow as though from deep underground. When, worn out, he had fallen asleep that night, two of the lads wanted to tie up his feet with a bridle and take him for a ride across the stubble—a favourite practical joke with them. Nikita flung the lads aside and said thoughtfully:

" 'Leave him alone. His head's worth more'n your two. Yours are only fit for the cobbler to

use as lasts. He wasn't scared, was he? Let him have his sleep.'

" 'He'll swell with pride,' one of the lads said in an offended tone.

" 'Pride doesn't come easy,' judged Nikita. 'A peacock only has to spread his tail; man earns it the hard way.'

"Alyosha Kruglov never knew about that talk. Nobody told him. But he was chaffed less and less, and more and more often was asked about the towns, seas, machines, about anything that came to mind during long nights in the field. Nikita never asked him anything. He would lie on his *armyak*, head propped on hand, and gaze silently into the fire. His dark eyes glistened, the dark forelock threw a fancy shade on his tanned cheek. Yes, he was a smart fellow."

The captain fell silent, as if himself engrossed in listening to somebody. A night-bird scurried over the tent and disappeared with a faint cry. The motorman turned back the canvas flap, had a look at the boat and lighted a cigarette. Two youngsters who had come with us for the trip up the Desna wheezed faintly as they slept. To them the captain's story would sound like a fairy-tale. Life had started for them during the war when they used to collect empty cartridge-cases, left by the fleeing Germans.

"Well?" Sashka gave voice.

"Well what?"

"Go ahead. Tell us who the third one was. There must be a third one. When there's a clash between two strong personalities, a weak one appears on the scene and carries off the girl. I'm sick of these eternal dramatic triangles."

"Don't go to the theatre, that's all," Sergei said.

"There was no third one," the captain said softly. "A pity there wasn't. One day Alyosha walked Sonya away from the others. Did he know of Nikita's orders? He was a friend of mine but he never answered that one, just looked into my eyes and never said anything. Yet I think he knew, though he had not been with us at the time. Why did Sonya go with the inconspicuous Alyosha? To spite Nikita, I daresay, by showing her preference for another. Little did she know at the time what she was in for.

"Next day it was the same and the day after and all the days that followed. Sonya was no longer her former quiet self: she could dance for hours on end, was the first in singing and fun-making. Strangely enough, the girls were fond of her and her company. They forgave her

the many suitors and even considered it quite natural. I believe you know how biting girls' tongues can be in such cases! For the lads she had sometimes a friendly word, sometimes a cutting one, no matter who it happened to be. In short Sonya began sparkling like a pearl, like a pool of water struck into life by moonlight. Soon there was no village lad between sixteen and twenty who had not offered to see her home. I, too, had a go at it," the captain confessed sadly. "She bent to me, her hair tickling my face, breathed out, 'Don't—don't come with me,' and turned away. Why 'don't'! Why? I could not understand it. For a month after I went about as if I were dazed. Her words would come back and everything recede into nothingness, everything except her grey eyes with the quizzical smile, quite close to mine. A regular nightmare that was! She went on going with Alyosha. Occasionally they even wouldn't go to the dances, just sit on the bench all by themselves.

"When Nikita was told that she had gone with Alyosha he bowed his head so that the forelock slipped down to the bridge of his nose, was silent for a while and then said in an unexpectedly calm voice:

" 'Well, what of it?'

" 'Why, you gave the order, didn't you? What shall we do?'

" 'Nothing,' said Nikita. 'It's all right, if it's Alyosha. I don't object to him.'

"A fortnight later, in the evening, Nikita came up to Alyosha and Sonya as they sat on their bench. With a polite 'hullo' he sat down and lighted up.

" 'So you've come,' Sonya said unsmilingly.

" 'Yes.'

" 'I said you would.'

" 'Yes, you did. May I stay with you for a while?'

" 'Ask Alyosha. I don't mind.'

"Surprisingly there was neither malicious joy nor hard feeling in her voice. Those present wondered at the change in them: both looked subdued and grave. Both were silent. Only Alyosha was speaking, rather too quickly, skipping from one subject to another. He seemed to be put out a bit, but Nikita kept his glance fixed on the ground right in front of him and never looked either at us, or him, or even Sonya. At last he tossed his head and said:

" 'Let's have a song.'

" 'Let's,' Sonya readily agreed.

"Our village lies rather high; when you sweep the country with your eye you see wide

stretches of pasture-land, lakes and brooks in the lacework of willow-bushes, and beyond the pastures the rich green of the Bryansk woods turning blue at the horizon. A sight to feast your eyes on! The pastures are filled with the songs of busy landrails, quails in the fields give their piece of advice, 'time to sleep,' to the world at large, the wind stirs branch upon branch in the orchards, rustling, rustling—all this blends into a music that vibrates in the very air. When the sun rises from out of the woods it looks like an outsize mushroom; when the moon is plumb above, you see another two score moons splashing in the river and small lakes downhill. And when on top of all this comes a soft meditative song—tears well in your eyes; it makes you want to rush somewhere, to embrace somebody, to perform some feat or prodigy, and you feel anxious and uneasy, and don't know why.

"They sang beautifully, two boys' voices and one girl's.

"After that things took a strange turn; every night, at sunset or later, after the dancing, they sat and sang, looking into the unfathomable expanse in front of them. Formerly always on the prowl, Nikita quieted down. There was only Sonya for him now. And so they sat and sang,

the three of them. Sonya would be taken home by both or just by Alyosha: she would not go with Nikita alone.

"One day Nikita was on a visit in the neighbouring village. Alyosha and Sonya sat on their bench all by themselves. To tell you the truth I hid behind the fence, wondering what they might be talking about. But they were silent. Seeing nothing from behind the fence, I thought they might be embracing. Suddenly I heard.

" 'Alyosha.'

" 'Yes?'

" 'Are there any people on the moon? They say there are. Are there?'

" 'No, there aren't. Too cold up there. It's a dead world.'

" 'Pity. I wish I were there just to take in the whole of the earth at one glance.'

" 'Not the whole you couldn't,' said Alyosha. 'You'd see only this half of it.'

" 'Still it's bigger than our village. The place's dull as ditch-water.'

"Frankly speaking that talk gave me the creeps. Fit for the churchyard, it was. I went aside and looked up at the moon. It shone forth, a gay, glad moon, with a radiant circle round it. No, I thought, that was no ordinary girl, that charmer, sometimes issuing forth

sparks from under the heels in dancing, eyes bright like stars, sometimes gripping your heart with a tender song, or singing a dirge, as it were, over somebody.... There was no understanding her!

"A week or so passed and then one evening we all gathered on the top of the steep chalky bank. We sang for a while, then stopped. Bantering began, legs were pulled. The good-looking full-bosomed Olya Boyaryshnikova, a kind-hearted but dull girl, said to the lad she was going with:

" 'Tie my shoes for me, will you. Can't you see they've come undone? Once you're my husband, there'll be no asking you anything. Just pub for you and home for me.'

" 'Nothing doing,' the carroty lad promptly took up the challenge. 'No point in getting used to it.'

" 'Come on now, tie them,' Sonya told him.

" 'We don't need that kind of thing', he repeated and went aside.

"Sonya Khmelkova took a look at Alyosha and Nikita, who always sat side by side when in company. Then, amid general silence and taking her time about it, she pulled a hemstitched handkerchief from under her cuff and threw it down on to the footpath.

" 'In my opinion no good turn is too hard for a loving heart, as they say. Who's going to do me one?'

"Any lad would have been glad to, yet no one budged under Nikita's heavy glance. Nikita looked at Alyosha; he sat motionless, his mouth firmly set, his questioning eyes fixed at something in the distance, and only a small vein visibly pulsed on his neck. A tense minute went by, then Nikita rose slowly, picked up the handkerchief, brought it back to Sonya and beating white dust from his trousers resumed his seat.

" 'There, I've done you a service,' he said. 'It's the second time I've picked up your handkerchief for you.'

" 'Thanks.' Sonya gave a short laugh, picked a daisy and handed it to him. 'You've earned it. Mind you don't lose it.'

" 'I won't,' said Nikita. 'The first time you hand me my high-boots when we're married you'll have your flower back, safe and sound.'

" 'You'll have to wait a long time.'

" 'I can wait.'

" 'So you do love me, don't you? I dare you to say that in front of everybody. Not that I want it. Just so that everybody will know.'

" 'I love you,' said Nikita.

" 'That won't get you anywhere.'

" 'It's not for your sake I love you but for my own. I get a kick out of doing what I want.'

"Speaking to Nikita, Sonya kept looking at Alyosha. But the latter got up, wavered for a moment and then went up the path, towards the village.

" 'Alyosha, come back,' called Nikita. 'We were only joking.'

"Alyosha was going away, never saying a word. To tone it down the lads and lasses resumed their merry bickering. But Sonya was silent. She bowed her head to her knees which were drawn up and clasped in her hands, and sorrowful tears trembled in her eyelashes. She spent that evening in sad solitude on the bench, having told Nikita to go away, and the next day she sent her timorous aunt to Alyosha's (we would not have believed that possible) to ask him to come outside. Neither passing people nor possible censure swayed her when she stood at his door, waiting. . . .

"And again they sang in three voices. . . .

"And so it went on till the autumn. But when the russet leaves lay thick on the roads Alyosha went away to attend a school for young peasants. It wasn't far, no more than five miles away, but it meant living out. Taking leave of Sonya, he asked her:

" 'Will you remember me?'

" 'Yes, I will, as long as I live.'

" 'And what about Nikita?'

" 'What about him?'

" 'Do you like him?'

" 'Yes. But my heart belongs to you. Here, feel it: it's beating yours-yours-yours. Can't you hear? Be sure and come to see me often.'

" 'I will.'

"He did come if not often: his time was taken up by studies and the practical work of enlightenment carried out in neighbouring villages. Sonya avoided Nikita at the evening parties and then went home alone or with a girlfriend. In the winter Alyosha came to stay for a fortnight. After the dances they walked up and down the whole length of the snow-buried street till late in the night, his arm round her, cheek pressed against cheek, so that they looked like one person in the darkness.

"One day when they sat on their bench Sonya again complained of boredom.

" 'I wish I could become an actress,' she said.

" 'Take up studies.'

" 'Where do they teach actors? I don't know.'

" 'Join the Y.C.L. They've got a club, there they study and have time for singing.'

" 'No Y.C.L. for me. I am not that type. Here

I'm among the first, there I'll have to toe the line.'

" 'Exactly like Nikita,' said Alyosha, 'the same pride.'

" 'Nikita's like me. There's only two of us.'

" 'Try and reason it out with your mind, not your heart.'

" 'My reason can't help me, my heart's stronger.'

"For some time Alyosha tried to drive his point home; she listened to him absently, then got up.

" 'Let's walk a bit; it's chilly here.' And suddenly she clung to him and herself kissed him for the first time. 'You will go away, my darling, and I'll be missing you, calling you back—softly, softly. You will think it the whisper of a distant snow-storm, but it will be me. Warm wind coming from afar will caress your cheek with the caress of early spring, but it will be me again, always me. . . .'

" 'Sonya, why should you say all this?'

" 'Forget it, Alyosha, I was joking. Let's go.'

" 'Once I asked Sonya why she tormented Alyosha. She pretended not to see my point.

" 'What makes you think I torment him? It's harder on Nikita but he never says a word.'

" 'Neither does Alyosha. But how will it all end up?'

" 'You know what the old doctor from the hospital told me? This, "Love can be bliss, love can be harm." Alyosha loves his books and studies better than me. That love will never let go of him. Two loves would be a torment.'

" 'Feeling jealous?'

" 'What if I am. For me it's neck or nothing. But how can I tell him that? I just can't.'

" 'I think you should.'

" 'You know what?' Sonya flared up. 'Mind your own business; things are bad enough as they are. Go away!'

"What could I do? And then she was right; Alyosha was the first to leave the village in search of education, blazing the trail for others, as it were. His parents and we, his friends, took pride in him and would hate to see Sonya put him off it. It was hard enough for him as things were. Yet we could not tell her all in case she felt hurt, acted on her own and made things still worse.

"A year passed. It was summer again. Of a warm evening I sat at the top of the steep bank, the one Alyosha Kruglov swam to that pitch-dark August night. I had wandered there, driven by unaccountable languish, and sat lost in

thought. Suddenly two familiar voices floated up to me: Alyosha and Sonya were coming my way. I wanted to rise and meet them, then I changed my mind. 'Let them go by, they are better off alone.' They passed near me and stopped a few paces away. I don't know what had happened between them before, only this was what Sonya said:

" 'Go, Alyosha. You've got brains, you will go far, very far, I'd be a burden to you. I haven't got the strength of character. And when you've made a name for yourself, I'll boast, in my weakness: "He was mine once." '

"In his agitation Alyosha was breaking twigs off a miserable lilac shrub with faded blossoms.

" 'Do you like Nikita?'

" 'I like you too. But he hasn't got anybody except me. I feel sorry for him.'

" 'And for me?'

" 'Not for you—yes, for you too.'

" 'Is he waiting for you?'

" 'Yes.'

" 'Sonya, dear, don't go. Let me see you home. Give it another thought.'

"She shook her head and said with a sigh: 'I can't.'

" 'Don't go, Sonya—something might happen to you.'

" 'It might. Then we'd have a wedding in a week's time. It's not what I want but it can't be helped.'

" 'Don't go!'

"She didn't say a word, drew herself up as if about to jump into cold water, clung to him for a moment, then drew aside and quickly went away down the footpath, the one she once threw her handkerchief upon. She then left the path and took a short cut for a small orchard, dark against the fields; apparently Nikita was there waiting for her. Alyosha gave a suppressed sob.

" 'Sonya!'

"There was no answer. Nothing but the sound of steps hurrying away along the rustling gravel of the footpath. Alyosha's sad call was heard again:

" 'So-o-nya!'

"Several minutes passed. The steps receded, then died away. At the turning, far below, a patch of moonlight seemed to flutter and dissolve, swallowed up in the duskiness of the orchard. For the third time Alyosha's sad, heart-gripping call was heard.

" 'So-o-o-nya!'

"A cold, indifferent echo rang among the willow-bushes that skirted the opposite bank

of the Desna, then worked, in softer tones, through the broom grove to the still softer key, no louder than the buzzing of a bee, at the very forest—and died away. A full moon was plumb above head, another two score of moons swam in the river and the small lakes round, and up on the top of the chalky slope Alyosha sat sobbing, Alyosha who never lowered his grey questioning eyes in face of threat or danger.

"A first love had come to an end. . . ."

The captain rose, fumbled with a match and lighted up. Rustling in the straw he stepped across to the entrance and undid the flap. The narrow oblong revealed encompassed a glistening slice of river, a strip of white mist that filled the gullies and still farther, at the very edge of the pasture, an oblong white spot looming high above the river.

"See that?" asked the captain. "Glimmering as white as ever, that same chalky slope."

A full moon was high in the sky; everything we could see through the door was submerged into trembling greenish light. For a moment a said pitiable call of "So-o-o-nya!" seemed to ring in the air, as if these twenty-five years had not passed. The captain shuddered, apparently be-

cause of the night's dampness, fastened the door and lay down.

"Is that all?" Sashka sounded reproachful.

"Yes."

"And where is she now? And Nikita?"

"She's not far from here, buried in the woods. I don't know the exact spot, haven't been there. She got into trouble with the Germans while the village was occupied. Killed a corporal in hot blood with an axe or something. Then she tried to get to the guerillas, was killed at the wood's edge, but the Germans did not venture near her. In the night she was carried away by our people and buried. Nikita's over there, in the village. He has been to the Urals to see his daughter—she's a physician—but could not stay for long away from his native place."

"And where is Alyosha?"

The captain rolled himself up in the blanket and was silent.

THE VILLAGE SMITHY

THE SMITHY stood on the edge of the village. The smell of burnt iron and the ring of hammers floated over the reaches and pools. For twenty-three years interrupted only by the war Mikhail Sidorovich Kozhevnikov had worked in the village smithy. He remembered how the thick, freshly cut pine logs had shown tenderly through the first layer of soot, how the bellows had squeaked like new boots, and how hubs and iron rims on the wheels used to glitter in the sun on an iron slab. That was in the first years of collectivization.

Now the smithy was black and sooty and the smith's dark unruly forelock had become grizzled and limp. Often he became absorbed in silent thought and overheated the piece he was forging, and sometimes during the break for a smoke he would say queer gloomy things:

"That's the way it is, Grisha, my lad, we ham-

mer away for all we are worth—and where do we find ourselves? Life shoves us into the back-yard so that we won't put on airs. . . ."

Grigory Karpenko, a lad of twenty, was the smith's mate. The collective-farm board had sent him to give a hand in the difficult days for the collective farm when tractors were scarce after the war, and the farmers used to harness cows to the ploughs. Then they left him for good. The lad was glad it turned out that way: he liked the work, the pay was good and he even made a little extra money on the side. He had his eye on Tanya, the smith's daughter; he wanted to marry her and already thought of building his own house. And in his mind's eye he saw the day when he would take the old smith's place in the smithy. His character was accomodating, he avoided heated arguments with the smith; but he put in a word or two once in a while.

"Everyone works where he chooses. Say what you like about our work, but it is industrial work after all. We handle metal."

"Industrial!" The smith laughed. "Some chaps make a turbine but all you make is an iron rod for granny Martinikha's cellar."

"A needle is a tiny thing but it helps to clothe us."

"And how do you make a needle? With a machine!" reasoned the smith. "Suppose we were told to turn out a needle—our collective farm would go broke. Yours is a shallow brain, Grisha. Your head's full of my Tanya, and there's no room for anything else. I'd better change my mind and not give my consent."

"Nowadays, Mikhail Sidorovich, they register marriages at the Village Soviet," his helper tried to joke.

"They do, don't they?" the smith reined him. "I have my own Village Soviet in my head for this occasion."

In the evening the mate reported to the smith's daughter:

"Made hints again.... Won't let you marry me, he says."

"And what did you say?"

"What could I say?"

Tanya looked up at Grigory with her black smiling eyes and shook her head boyishly.

"You just stood there and gazed like a calf, I suppose. Never mind, that's not the problem. It'll be just as we decide. Let's go to the dance."

In the beginning of June when the sowing time was over, the smith got a lift on a passing lorry and went to visit his friend who lived thirty miles away. He wanted to stay there for

a week and also to try and get some nuts and bolts for the smithy but he came back in four days grumpy and irritated.

"Well, my boy," he said as he entered the smithy, "guess what I am now? Chief of the forging department."

"That's right," agreed his mate. "On a collective-farm scale."

The smith looked askance at his mate but did not notice the irony and spat into the pile of rusty iron rods, broken and worn-out horseshoes and other iron junk in the corner.

"Scale, my eye!" he grumbled. "Talk about scale! There are cow-tenders and gardeners who are Heroes of Socialist Labour, but have you ever heard of a smith being a Hero of Socialist Labour? Never! Why? Think of it."

The mate knew the smith's character only too well and he got on all right with him. Gaunt, with dark deep-sunken eyes, the smith would fly off the handle apparently for no reason at all. He would then work in silence or go out and sit on the iron slab and pull on his pipe as he gazed out at the river where passing clouds dragged dark-blue tails of rain, or at the lakes and streams which gleamed in fine weather. After the hay-making the meadow was dotted over with haystacks as far as eye could

see, and you could hardly imagine that so much hay could ever be consumed. But the best time of all was flood-time: the water, spread over the three-mile stretch of meadow-lands and bushes, rushed along hissing and gurgling and the sun dived and capered on its surface.

After two or three smokes the smith returned subdued and lectured peacefully:

"Nature, Grisha, there's a mighty big piece of work for you! Takes some thinking out! And we humans are so touchy. Disproportion, that's what I calls it."

Sometimes, usually towards the end of the day, the smith got a fit of the blues. He would sit on the threshold of the smithy, fold his work-weary arms on his chest and plunge into thought, rocking slightly to and fro. The forge cooled, fresh breeze wafted from the fields through the open door, ancient trees whispered softly in the orchard beyond the smithy. A song rose high in the fields under the ruddy glow of sunset; one voice would sing, then another would join in, and soon you could not tell how many there were. The song floated over hill and dale, farther and farther, calling, calling. No one knew where. As the song continued the ruddy forest ridge became dull, and the first stars looked into the backwater. The smith

would heave a sigh, hang a two-pound lock on the door and threaten:

"I'll go away from here, Grisha, I'll swing the hammer until spring and then be off. You'll have to manage alone, lad; I'll head south to the works. They've got steam-hammers there, know what they're like? Terrific! I should like to operate one. Make the earth shake."

Autumn came, winter, then spring, but Kozhevnikov had no intention of going. Only his soul wandered here and there, like a bird of passage. It would spend its melancholy and come back....

On that day even a smoke did not help; the smith was in an angry mood. To cap it all, as he snatched a red-hot cramp from the forge and swung it over his shoulder, he dropped it and burned his hand. Cursing he dashed down the tongs and shouted at his mate:

"Enough! Put down your hammer and get out of here. For good!"

"It was not my fault!" said Grisha timidly.

"I'm not blaming you! But I can't stand the sight of you."

"What do you mean, the sight of me?"

"You're like a piece of wood. You handle iron but you act as though you were made of wood. People around you try to achieve some-

thing but you loll about like a carp in a backwater. I just can't put up with it!"

As he left he flung out without turning his head:

"Come and see me this evening with your father."

Grisha's father flew into a rage when he was told the news.

"The sooty fiend! What's the idea?" he said. "You know what, Grisha, it's your pay he's after. He wants it all for himself. Just wait till I see him. I'll give him a piece of my mind!"

There are some people who are just like bottled kvas in hot weather: it goes up in bubbles for twenty seconds and then goes flat. The same with Karpenko Sr. His anger spent, he said to his son beseechingly:

"You might show him some respect, Grisha, eh! Go easy with him, you depend on him, you know. Promise him to work for two and don't show your temper. Well, we'd better go."

While Karpenko Sr. was fumbling with the door-handle in the dark passage, Tanya tugged at Grisha's sleeve.

"Come out a minute."

Grisha fell behind and went out into the front garden.

"Well?" asked Tanya threateningly.

"Kicking me out."

"What shall we do?"

"How do I know!"

"You must know. Because there are two of us now. You've got to think for both of us! He won't get me down. I've said my say."

The smith's head and shoulders appeared in the open window.

"Tanya, let him go, and bring us some pickled cucumbers from the cellar."

When she returned the smith motioned her to sit down.

"You'd better listen. It concerns you as well."

The conversation started as usual with the weather, then it drifted to crop forecasts. They downed a small glass of vodka, then another. Karpenko's blood began to boil again.

"Stop beating about the bush, Sidorovich, out with it."

The smith was silent for a moment, then he brought his hand down with a thwack.

"All right, if you want it that way. I'm through with Grisha. Let him go."

"What are you talking about," Karpenko Sr. sniggered. "You haven't drunk much but you've let your tongue run away with you. Why has he got to go? He knows his trade, likes it. If he doesn't understand something, don't hesitate,

make him understand even if it comes to thrashing. I'll back you up."

"Shut up," the smith cut him short. "I've said my say. He must go. I'll not marry Tanya off to a helper if it comes to that. No use for him to waste his time."

"What rot you talk, Sidorovich." Karpenko Sr. spread out his arms perplexed. A smith yourself and you talk about your trade like that."

"Tell me, Afanasievich, how do you make heels for the bast shoes?"

"What's bast shoes got to do with it, I wonder?"

"You must've forgotten. It's a long time since you made any, isn't it! You walk about in top-boots. Rake your brains a bit. Remember how the women used to spin wool in our village—a textile industry in one room. It's all gone now, man, died out! Wandering harness-makers, tailors—not a trace left of them either. Life has gone ahead. And who am I? I'm the last smith in the village. I'm a born craftsman, perhaps, my trade-name will remain but the thing will be different. You can't do anything about it. Time flies ahead. Like some horses—it pushes ahead because you nag it on, but it always looks back."

Karpenko Sr. was offended. "Yours is queer talk. I'm not a horse, I'm your neighbour."

"Just a minute. Do you see that?" The smith nodded towards the window.

Now and again lorries passed through the village and the glare of their headlights lit up the windows and front gardens. Their horns, lights and noise became part of the night village noises just like frog songs in spring, creaking of landrails and summer cries of quail.

"Lorries, that's all," said Karpenko Jr.

"Quite right. Machinery! Well it's as far from our smithy to that machinery as from the earth to the sky. There's been times when we turned out hand-made nails but that costs too much now. I've been thinking about it for many a year. I didn't even sleep at night. Tried to figure out whether I was moving ahead or standing still. People are forging on and on. And what about me? There's been times when we forged whole ploughs in the smithy, to say nothing of ploughshares, mould-boards, axes and sickles. Those times are gone now. What is there left for us to do? To shoe horses and to make rims and cramps. Useful job too, but still the scope is not quite the same. I went to visit my friend just recently. My god, he's got a loose tongue but his head is sound. Well,

we had a drop or two, sang some songs—he's a good singer! Then he says: 'Come on, Mikhailo, I'll show you a smithy.' 'I have one of my own, no need for me to soot myself up in yours!' He only laughs, the red-headed devil. 'Your smithy is a thing of the past. Come and have a look at a new one.' So we went to the machine-and-tractor station shop. An avenue leads up to the gates, and there was a power station chugging away. I walked in. A regular plant it was! They mould, cast, turn and grind parts all by themselves. Three rows of lathes. I've spent half a century in the smithy but what can I do? I can drive a nail into the back of a lorry, and they can screw on nuts without my help. I looked at a boy operating a lathe. He was a professor, compared with an old wood-grouse like me. I wanted to cry with disappointment: missed my chance, hadn't thought of it before, wasted myself on trifles.

" 'Your place rings louder though!' my friend laughed.

"I quarrelled with him and left. When I came back home I took a look at my smithy—nothing but a black hole. And there was your son on top of it all. If I only had his health and strength I would try to achieve something in life; there would be no holding me. But he's

already satisfied as he is; his brains are getting rusty. I can't bear the sight of him."

"Well I'll be . . ." grunted Karpenko Sr. despondently. "You really think he'll sweep you aside with your smithy?"

"You bet. It's like a flood, man!"

"What do you mean flood?"

"Don't you know how a flood begins? First the snow is nibbled away, then a rivulet springs up. Another one joins it. And before you know there's water swirling, seething in the ravine. The flood has started! The river holds on grunting stubbornly. But the rivulets rush forward, the ice breaks up and the water floods the banks. You stand there and marvel. It takes your breath away: mighty power rushes past you glittering in the sun and everything round you, steep banks, villages and clouds, is reflected in it. It sweeps along everything that stands in its way, on towards the sun. A knotty log would inch its way towards the bank, stop in a quiet pool and settle in the mud. You think it has found a quiet place, but no, another log runs smack into it, pushes it, a wave turns it, and before you know it rushes on again in the middle of the stream."

The smith fell silent, then added in subdued voice:

"You've got to push Grisha out into the stream. Let him sail."

"Where to?"

"To the machine-and-tractor station. They need men like him over there. If they build another one close to our village he'll get a transfer there, and then he'll take me as a mate perhaps. As for me, I've got a family on my hands. Sort of rooted to the place."

"What about the pay?" exclaimed Karpenko Sr. "If he's going to study we'll have to give him money instead of him giving us."

"I don't know," said the smith. "Haven't thought of that. As for me, any food will stick in my throat if I have no heart for a job. You don't eat just for the sake of eating, but to live. Man is not a cow which is content with chewing."

"What about me?" exclaimed Tanya.

"You'll wait. You've finished your schooling, now you'll work in the collective farm."

"Someone into the stream, others into the mud like a knotty log, and what about our love? Forget about it for a while, is that what you want?"

"When I was your age I bent my back from morning till night. . . ."

"Perhaps I should learn how to make bast

shoes? I have no heart to weed potatoes with a chopper. Look at all the machinery they keep sending to the villages."

The smith looked perplexed.

"Take it easy. Don't fly off the handle. I've been thinking of sending you to a technical school."

"But I don't want to be an agronomist. I want to operate some machine. Everyone will be an agronomist, and who will toil the land and harvest crops? I'll go with Grisha!" Tanya exclaimed and ran out, ready to burst into tears.

"Grisha, go and try to persuade her," the smith ordered. "You can manage, I think. She's crazy about you!"

"Well, Sidorovich, I really admire your scope," said Karpenko Sr.

"It's not me, my friend. It's life. I've got nothing to do with it."

"What about the kids?"

"Too early for them to get married anyway. Remember how it used to be? As soon as you could handle a plough you were a grown-up, master of the house. Today you need knowledge, you've got to have a skilled job. Still, I don't know what to do with Tanya. If only your Grisha had her character, he'd become a

general. I think I'll go to my friend for some advice."

They went out and said good-bye in the street. The smith remained alone. The dew had fallen in the pastures, the smell of corn and potato leaves was wafted from the fields, the Milky Way floated overhead. Two shadows emerging from the orchard walked up the street, gradually melting in the starry sky. All of a sudden a sharp pang of sadness overcame Kozhevnikov as if it was his own youth departing from him never to return.

Two weeks passed. The smith was again at work in his smithy. During a break for a smoke he said contentedly to his new mate, a lad with unruly hair who had just finished his seventh grade:

"We hammer away together, Sasha, my lad, but before long you'll be going away from me. And you'll take my daughter with you, like Grisha. Won't you, eh?"

"I've nowhere to go, Uncle Mikhailo!"

"Nowhere, you say?"

"I don't know."

"Don't know, eh? Well, I do. You'll be drawn away, my lad. They say there will be a garage built in our collective farm, and it will have a repair-shop before long with all kinds of ma-

chinery, not much of a technique but still better than ours. They'll buy a welding apparatus. Wonderful thing."

"When will that be, Uncle Mikhailo?"

"Ah-a, you feel the attraction already!"

"Me? No. . . ." Sasha was embarrassed. "Perhaps we can go together."

"You think so?" The smith livened up. "Aren't you aiming too high! We've got to figure it out first. Suppose Grisha's in charge. Then he will say I want people with knowledge of technique. That's how it is, so we'd better learn some speciality in the meantime. Well, take the hammer, my lad. Let's pitch into it. Come on!"

And one couldn't say whether he was joking or whether his restless soul longed for tomorrow, already measuring itself with new worries, new ideas and not falling short of them.

BARREN VICTORY

A Story About Fishing

If you were to wake Fedya Yershov, a friend of mine, in the dead of night and tell him that he could get green fishing-line and hooks of exceptional strength at a place ten miles away, he would be up and dressed in two minutes and then walk all the way to get them. The weather did no matter—he had lain so many hours on ice fishing through a hole, lashed by blizzards and numbed by the frost, and so many storms had raged over his head while he sat, rod in hand, over pools and shoals, that he had become weather-proof for the rest of his life.

During the day Fedya hunched over agricultural booklets he was given to edit, but in the evening he would escape to the river and stay there until the stars filled to the brim the gleaming waters of the pool. He belonged to the wandering tribe of float-worshippers, and

his outfit usually consisted of a three-joint fishing-rod, a straw hat, a checked shirt, and high rubber boots. Three or four spare hooks were stuck in the brim of his hat, in the leg of his boot he carried a kitchen-knife which was a screw-driver, cork-screw, awl and axe all in one, and a linen bag with worms hung from his belt. Fedya's approach to fishing was distinguished by his contempt for all sorts of angling "do's and don't's," his complete disregard for any advice offered and his refusal to popularize his methods. He was an improviser and pinned all his faith on the deadly attraction of a muck-worm and on his own inspiration.

Now, Vasya Koshelev, a young economist, the second principal character of this story, went about fishing in a deliberate and calculating manner. Fedya would run up and down the bank, casting his line tentatively here and there, guided mainly by the motto of the popular song, "You'll find the thing you look for, if hard enough you look."

Meanwhile Vasya would choose a place and sit there, immovable as a stone idol, firm in his belief that fish was to be found everywhere provided you knew how to catch it. His tackle was smart and faultless; when fishing he took into consideration such factors as the readings

of the barometer and thermometer, the direction of the wind, the movement of the clouds, the shape of the bank, the type of the water-weeds, the position of his own shadow, and a great deal more. He had green fishing-rods, green lines, green floats with white tails, green shirt and cap, and blue eyes—in short, his camouflage was so perfect that ide and bream could only have detected his presence with the aid of radar. In accordance with the instructions he continually changed the bait. He used peas, corn, potatoes—in fact everything grown in field or kitchen-garden, with the exception of horse-radish. The only points that he and Fedya had in common were that they were both young, flaxen-haired and single.

One summer the three of us, with the addition of two of our friends—a school-teacher and a bookkeeper—decided to spend a week of our holidays fishing out in the country. The equipment of our camp was made up of a fire, over which we alternately boiled fish-soup or tea, a piece of tarpaulin stretched between two hazel-bushes, an oak grove, a blue sky with curly clouds, a green carpet of grassy meadows spread carelessly along the bank, and a stretch of river with several deep pools.

For two days our life floated on, blissfully

tranquil, under clouds and stars, between the fragile walls of dawns and sunsets. On the third day a group of holiday-makers pitched camp near by. There were nine of them—two dads, two mammas, four snub-nosed kids ranging from eight to eleven years, and a girl of nineteen. The dads spent their time fishing by the most primitive of methods—with a net, sprawling in the sun, and smearing with vaseline the blisters they had got from rowing. The children chased jays and blue dragonflies, while the mammas chased the children, dispensing beneficial admonitions on the run. The children were tanned and healthy, full of energy and tireless in thinking up new pranks, and the mammas had a hard time of it. With the arrival of the new settlers peace and quiet fled from our grove in a panic to come back only at night —stealthily and for a brief spell.

At noon, after we had done our fishing for the morning and had our lunch, we called on our neighbours. The ceremony of introduction was, as it usually is on such occasions, simple and brief. Our attention was attracted by a large frying-pan with sizzling juicy hunks of a big broad fish. We, too, had just had some fried fish for lunch, but it bore no comparison to this one. True, the night before a young

sheat-fish had had a go at one of our hooks, but it had refused to make a closer acquaintance with us and made off with half of the hook. This was plain burglary, especially as the gudgeon on the hook had been meant for pike.

"Carp?" Fedya asked, squinting at the frying-pan. "Good fish, but cries out for some sour cream."

"Bream," a dad said. "Nothing to catch carp on."

We took a good look at the two dads. We could have staked our heads that it wasn't their nets that had brought this lovely fish out of the river. So we voiced the only logical conclusion that suggested itself:

"Bought it?"

"Goodness, no!" The dads laughed. "Whoever buys fish on a river? Sasha caught it."

"Which Sasha?"

"There she comes."

We looked. A girl was coming up, with a bamboo fishing-rod on her shoulder, carrying two chub on a string. She was light and slender as a young birch-tree, her dark hair tousled under her green canvas cap and her round black-currant eyes looking gay and friendly. She said "hullo" to us, and her tanned cheeks flushed suddenly with embarrassment.

"Fish usually don't bite at noon," Fedya remarked with professional envy, his eyes, which had suddenly grown brighter, shifting from Sasha to the chub and back.

"Yes, they rest at noon," Vasya Koshelev confirmed with the dignified gravity of one relying on scientific data. "Anyone knows that."

"But not the fish, it seems," a dad said with a grin. "With Sasha they bite any time, day or night. The other day she caught two small sheat-fish when the moon was already up."

We shrank into ourselves at the thought of our morning's catch—about three dozen perch and roach per head. We asked Sasha how long she had been fishing and why she had taken to so unwomanly a hobby. She told us that she studied at a teachers' college and in wintertime missed terribly her home village where she had spent her childhood at her grandmother's. There she had come to love the river and started to go out fishing with the village boys. And village boys know the habits of the fish no worse than any professor-ichthyologist.

"But you must admit just the same that you got these bream by pure luck," Fedya remarked. "Bream have gone away from here."

"Not from me," Sasha laughed. "Why should they go away? And it isn't mere chance either.

I don't catch them in deep places but on the passage. There's a sort of groove on the bottom, below those birches over there. The bream pass through it on their way down the river. That's where I intercept them."

We returned to our camp humiliated and dejected. The very idea of a mere student girl outdoing old hands! We would never have believed it were possible, but there it was.

"The ancient Greeks had a goddess Diana—she went hunting," the teacher mused aloud. "And our Diana goes fishing. I wonder what her secret is."

"She said she grew up on a river, didn't she?" Vasya Koshelev reminded us. "She knows fish and its habits thoroughly. Sabaneyev says in his book that. . . ."

"It's just that she uses the same method as I do," Fedya drew a modest conclusion.

"What have you or Sabaneyev got to do with it?" the teacher said. "You two grew up on a river too and know everything there is to know, but all you catch is some paltry roach and perch. You cut a sorry figure with your theory and practice."

"As a rule women are no good at fishing or hunting," Vasya said, embarking on broad

generalizations. "They haven't the necessary restraint and patience."

"Go and tell that to Sasha!"

"I know the explanation," the bookkeeper put in.

"What is it?"

"Don't you see how nice and lovely she is? If I were a young fish I'd bite an empty mustard-pot if she offered it. And now look at yourselves—a three days' beard, peeling noses! Why, the very look of you kills a fish's appetite, to say nothing of its sense of beauty."

Pigeons cooed in the crowns of oak-trees, blue dragonflies hung like precious stones from the branches of willows bending over the water, a warm wind was caressing the grass with a light touch. We lay in the shade, sleep like honey stuck together our eyelids, but even with our eyes shut we could see the lovely tanned face and the slender figure in slacks and a blue silk shirt.

The evening catch brought no change in the balance of forces—the neighbours again had bream for supper, while we had but small fry and two ide to show for our pains. There was also a barbel that Fedya contrived to hook, but it only weighed just over two pounds—a flaw which greatly impaired its chances of success

in the contest against Sasha's bream. When we were turning in for the night, Fedya said thoughtfully:

"I think I'll ask her to explain her method to me tomorrow. It's never too late to learn, is it?"

"Fedya is biting already," the teacher muttered.

"Not just biting—hooked," the bookkeeper added.

"Not just hooked—gaffed and landed," I contributed. "If I were a young fish. . . ."

"Yes, we know—you'd bite an empty mustard-pot."

"That's right."

"What Fedya's going to do is unreasonable and, in fact, humiliating for a man's self-respect," said Vasya. "Girls have no use for weaklings. . . . As for me, I'll get the bream first, and then we'll have a good laugh at you—Sasha and me together."

We could see that our young fellows had got it bad. Well, you know what young people are. And while love at first sight does occur, more often still the first meeting arouses a deep and sincere emotion which is but one step from love.

In the morning Fedya and Vasya disappeared

simultaneously. Fedya, with a look of joyful and humble embarrassment, made resolutely for our neighbours' camp, while Vasya turned to the river, breathing manly determination and tenacity of purpose.

Two days later we witnessed the final act of the drama. It was late evening. We sat in the generous reddish glow of the family fire. The children drank their tea nodding sleepily, while the mammas and dads were busy working out the details of their further movement down the river. And although it was by mere chance that we had met those two energetic families, so passionately fond of nature, and although from the morrow on we were guaranteed peace and quiet again, we felt sad....

At first none of the young folk were about, and we talked in the leisurely manner of people who have lived long and seen much. The first to come up was Vasya—in his green shirt and cap he looked like a river knight just risen from a rippling wave. Five minutes later Sasha joined us, and the checks of Fedya's shirt showed against the background of the oak underbrush dimly lit by the fire. Vasya took Sasha's catch and displayed it for everybody to see—it consisted of a few miserable perch. The sight must have given him the keenest

satisfaction for he looked rather like a general who had just won a difficult but decisive battle.

"No bream," he said with a grin.

Sasha blushed and lowered her eyes.

"No bream. They've gone away," she explained.

"Why should they go away?" Vasya retorted mercilessly and produced two bream from his bag. "Here they are—five pounds thirteen ounces in one and four pounds in the other."

That was the height of pedantry. I almost expected Vasya to give us their length to a hundredth of an inch, but he spared us that. The mammas and dads looked admiringly at the victor. The bookkeeper and the teacher inquired what bait he had used to lure those golden-scaled beauties.

"Boiled potatoes," he informed them condescendingly. "I told you I'd do it, and so I did."

I did not say anything though I could have supplied a piece of important information. I recalled something I had chanced to witness that afternoon.

On the bank overgrown with grass and flowers sat Sasha and Fedya, shoulder pressed to shoulder. A white cloud lay in the water at their feet, and quite close by, as if convinced

that there was nothing to fear, birds sang for all they were worth, swinging on the stalks of wild sorrel. Two floats on tangled lines, beaten to the bank by the current, were drying in the sun. I don't know what the two were talking about—I suppose it was one of those conversations which cannot always be put down on paper even in verse. There was a moment when Fedya pulled out his knife from his bootleg and, using it as a fountain-pen, engraved Sasha's telephone number on his fishing-rod. Then he put the rod back on the grass, without so much as glancing at the float. And when I recalled that scene, Vasya's splendid golden bream lost all their glamour in my eyes.

Never in my life had I seen a victory as barren as that won by Vasya Koshelev that day. And never had I seen a happier loser than Fedya Yershov who, for the next two days, came back from his fishing with empty hands but with a song in his heart.

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N. Gribachov writes of people such as the smith Kozhevnikov *(The Village Smithy)*, whose soul is never at rest.

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